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Games in Film, Film as Play Religion and Virtual Worlds in Cinema

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati

The article focuses on the interaction between game and religion within the research field of religion and film. It considers productions from the end of the last century like *NIRVANA* (Italy 1996, Gabriele Salvatores), *EXISTENZ* (USA/Canada/UK 1998, David Cronenberg) and *THE MATRIX* (USA 1999, Larry and Andy Wachowsky). A film-historical example introduces the striking relationship between play, religion and film. In a further step, a sample of contemporary films dealing with play and games are selected, presented and analyzed from the perspective of the study of religion. Particular attention is given to explicit religious symbols, motifs, and plots. In a third step, attention is directed away from the inner filmic fiction to the pragmatics of the film as a piece of fiction. Finally, the analyzed scenes are considered from the perspective of the cinema as a public place for playing with fiction and fictional worldviews. Here some general theoretical considerations with regard to film as an equivalent to religion and ritual are critically discussed, with particular reference to the role of play and game.

Autrement dit, si la fiction est une dimension fondamentale de la référence du texte, elle n'est pas moins une dimension fondamentale de la subjectivité du lecteur. Lecteur, je ne me trouve qu'en me perdant. La lecture m'introduit dans les variations imaginatives de l'ego. La métamorphose du monde, selon le jeu, est aussi la métamorphose ludique de l'ego.

Paul Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action*

1. A Film-Historical Introduction

THE SEVENTH SEAL (*DET SJUNDE INSEGLET*, Ingmar Bergman, S 1956) exemplifies how striking and varied the connections between play, religion, and film-art can be. In this masterpiece, Bergman entwines different aspects of play with explicit topics from the Christian tradition. Indeed, the film title, a reference to the book of *Revelation*, is programmatic. Play and games



Figure 1 THE SEVENTH SEAL, 00:04:36.



Figure 2 THE SEVENTH SEAL, 01:30:44.



Figure 3 THE SEVENTH SEAL, 00:30:51.

are key elements throughout the entire filmic diegesis and are integral to its style. Gaming aspects are foregrounded in a chess game between Death and a medieval crusader (fig. 1). Varied aspects of “play” are depicted: Mia and Jos, a couple of traveling performers, play with their small child, Michael (fig. 2), whilst the stage of an open-air theater offers some relief to the deprived villagers. By means of acrobatics, pantomime, jokes, and music, the theater company provides an open space in a very dark atmosphere (fig. 3). Hence, in the context of *THE SEVENTH SEAL*, the positive and peaceful performing family can be interpreted as a filmic self-reflexive device. Theater and cinema are presented as realms of play, as spaces of creativity and life.¹

Religion is strongly intertwined with all these different facets of play: the chess game is presented as an image of the transiency of life;² the narrative, in its structure and rhythm, follows the plot of *Revelation* (fig. 4); the performing family is visually identified with the Holy Family (fig. 5).

1 See the sequence in 00:46:33-00:54:00.

2 This becomes obvious in the first dialogue between the knight and Death (00:03:40-00:04:50).



Figure 4 THE SEVENTH SEAL, 00:01:18. On the sound level, the appearance of the eagle corresponds with a musical quotation of *Dies irae*, followed by a reading of Revelation 8:1–2.

The historicizing style depicts some commonplaces of Christianity in the mediaeval era: dark churches, monasteries, flagellant processions, stakes and witches, and the Inquisition. In *THE SEVENTH SEAL*, the multifaceted relationships between religion and play are staged by narrative and audiovisual means. Simplistic dualisms between religion and play are undercut by the nuanced representation of religious elements, simultaneously evoking both positive and negative connotations. The production elaborates an intricate puzzle, which stimulates reflection on the possibilities of fiction and performance as spaces of freedom and creativity within society.

Cinematic exploration of the interplay between religion, film and play is attested in numerous examples throughout film history. In this contribution, I focus on a selection of films dealing with computer games, ranging from the late 1990s to the beginning of the 21st century. Like Bergman's work, these films exhibit a strong link between play and religion; yet they also reflect on the new and peculiar possibilities that virtual worlds present. Computer games create fictive sceneries that are received visually and generate multi-layered interactions between virtual and real worlds. Through astonishing technologies, computer games lend the appearance of verisimilitude to their virtual worlds. By presenting this form of play and game, the films under scrutiny raise the perennial question of the relationship between fiction and reality.³

3 On this topic, see Weber 2008: *Medialität als Grenzerfahrung*, 254: "Die Mediendarstellung der in den 90er Jahre gedrehten Filme haben eines gemeinsam: Sie projizieren computergenerierte virtuelle Welten, Realitätssimulationen, in denen sich die Protagonisten zu verlieren drohen. Damit rücken sie ab einer Mediendarstellung, die auf bestimmte Funktionen hin betrachtet wurde.

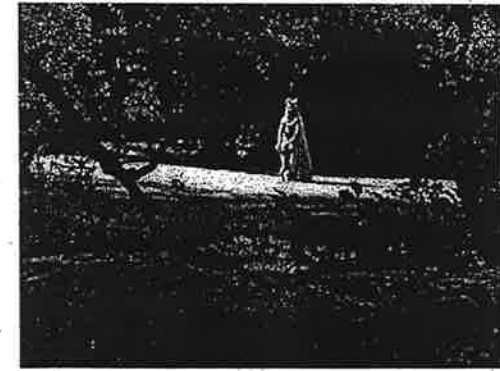


Figure 5 THE SEVENTH SEAL, 00:04:36.

My central question in this paper concerns the use of religious symbolism and plots within specific cinematic settings. In the first stage of this investigation, the selected films will be analyzed on the level of narrative and style, with particular attention paid to religious elements and their function. Secondly, the focus will center on the interaction between film as a fictive medium and its characteristic manner of presenting computer games. In the final section, we will consider cinema as a place of play.

Therefore, the argumentation is developed from the ground-up, rising in an arc from the underlying sources of religious symbolism in films concerned with "play" to the role of the medium in reflecting upon such interplay. It commences with the religious elements in particular films; then it raises the question of the religious relevance of filmic plots dealing with virtuality. Finally, cinema will be considered as a social space where the film is seen and received. To emphasize affinities between the selected examples, a comparative approach is taken to discuss each film.

2. Religious Semantics in the Selected Films

The film corpus chosen for this study encompasses European art-house works, like *NIRVANA* (Gabriele Salvatores, I 1996) and *EXISTENZ* (David Cronenberg, CDN/UK 1998), as well as commercial productions like the *MATRIX* trilogy by Andy and Larry Wachowski (*THE MATRIX*, USA 1999; *THE MATRIX RELOADED*, USA 2003; *THE MATRIX REVOLUTIONS*, USA 2003) and will include a brief glance at *AVATAR* (James Cameron, USA 2009). All these films

Die Filme argumentieren umfassender, philosophischer, wenn man so will. Epistemologische Fragen stellen sich in grösserer Schärfe als je zuvor."

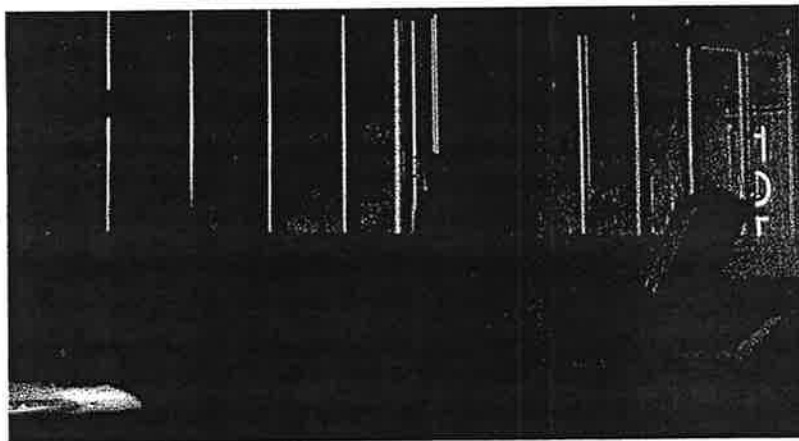


Figure 6 NIRVANA, 00:07:28.

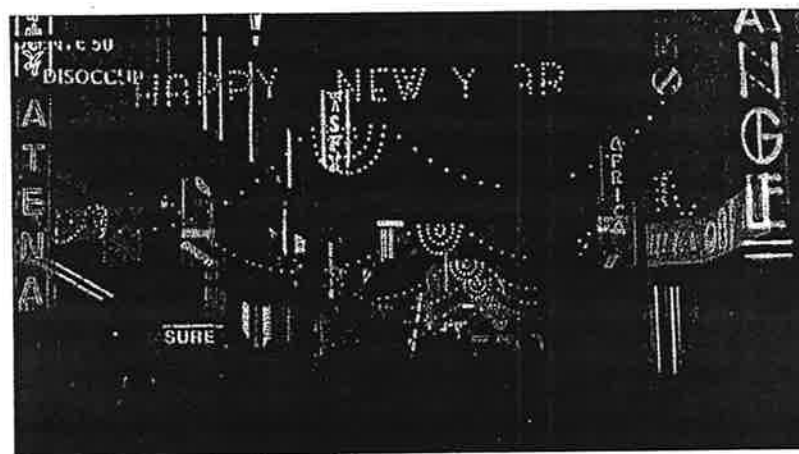


Figure 7 NIRVANA, 00:16:05.

belong to the science fiction genre and use explicit religious symbolism and motifs, as well as multi-layered references to various faith traditions.

In *NIRVANA*, the computer game designer Jimi, himself in a deep personal crisis, realizes that one character in his game *Nirvana*, Solo, wishes to put an end to his virtual existence. Solo can no longer stand being shot all the time, having to die continuously from violent assaults and eternally re-starting with identical moves. Solo begs his designer to eliminate his poor virtual life and to delete him from the program. Jimi consents, although he

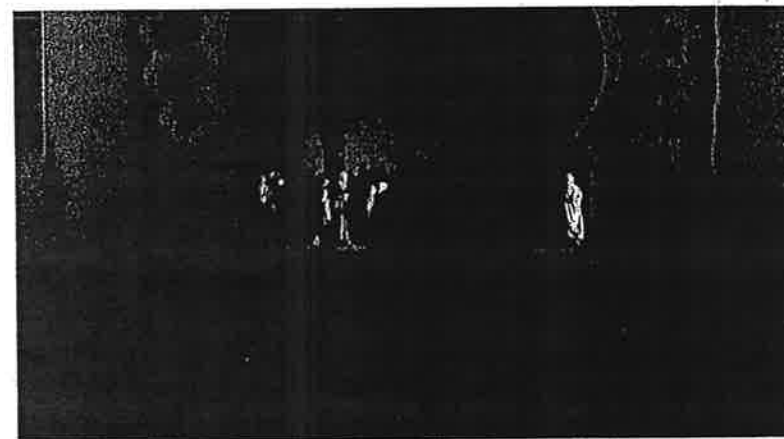


Figure 8 NIRVANA, 00:18:58.

has already sold the game to a production company. Therefore, Jimi must infiltrate the server of the company, and this leads to a thrilling trip where he encounters many scurrilous cyber freaks who help him to reach his goal.

In the film *NIRVANA*, religious imagery is used to distinguish different places within the filmic topography. The fiction is set in a future world that consists of just one huge city, the Agglomeration North. This immense urban area is divided into parts with various characteristics: the district Jimi lives in is a clean, rich, and sterile city dominated by functional architecture (fig. 6). Communication and services are the jobs of robots and computers. Outside this district lies a multi-cultural and multi-religious melting pot, very much inspired by *BLADE RUNNER* (Ridley Scott, USA 1982) (fig. 7). The urban district where privileged inhabitants live contrasts with two other districts named Marrakech and Bombay City. The former is a dangerous place, characterized by drugs, illegal businesses, and crime. Police and state security do not enter Marrakech; in this part of Agglomeration North, a destructive self-regulation dominates (fig. 8). Bombay City, however, is an underground district where the search for spiritual experiences and other forms of alternative states of consciousness are on offer almost everywhere (fig. 9). In both these urban districts, elements from Islamic and Indian traditions and cultures are deployed as visible identity-markers representative of different cultures and settings. Using stereotypical facets of "Islam," "Hinduism" and "Buddhism," this science fiction film creates places buzzing with life reminiscent of an imagined



Figure 9 NIRVANA, 01:02:34.

orient, in order to contrast with the cold atmosphere of the elite district. The general multi-cultural ambience is evoked by displaying people in religious clothing like Buddhist monks or Catholic Nuns.

As an alternative to these three districts, there is the virtual space of the computer game, *Nirvana*, which is global and can be played from anywhere. This world is designed in the spirit of “Shanghai City,” again showing strong multi-cultural and religious traits. Only in this cyberspace can the film characters glimpse the significance of love and life. Superior to the different religious practices available in Bombay City, the virtual space offers to humans a sense of meaning for their life, whilst for Solo, the conscious virtual character within the game, it is a space of existential deceit.

In David Cronenberg’s *eXistenZ*, religious elements are also associated with topographical referents: the narrative begins and ends in a church converted into an events hall (figs. 10 and 11). Here, a computer game company promotes its products, organizing special sessions for fans and designers. A comparative analysis of the first and the last sequence reveals the main question that lies at the core of this film. The very last sentence “Hey, tell me the truth. Are we still in a game?” (01:29:57–01:30:00) summarizes the dominant narrative line: the blurring of boundaries between game and reality.

The film begins with a promotional event for the game *eXistenZ* produced by the company Antenna: the new game will be tested by a group of fans led by the world’s most famous designer, Allegra Geller. The film ends

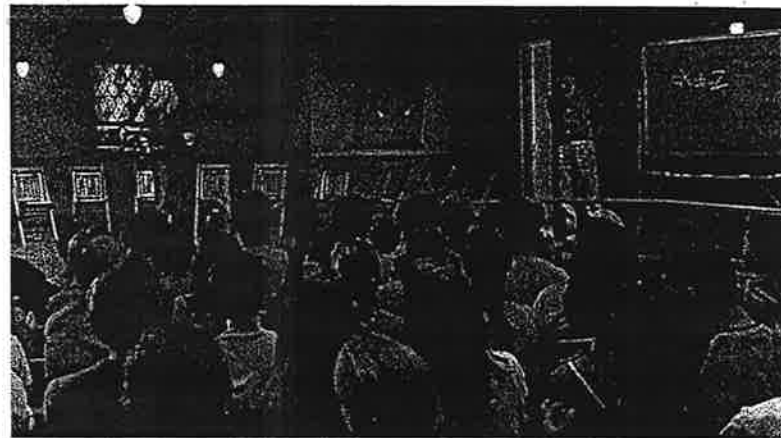


Figure 10 eXISTENZ, 00:50:25.

in an altered setting where the audience finds out that the tested game is now called *transCendenZ* and is produced by Pilgrimage. The group in the church encompasses the same individuals as at the beginning, but now everybody is playing a different role (figs. 10 and 11).

The religious elements are fully integrated into the film narration: the designer is presented as a “goddess” (00:04:17), the chosen setting for the launch is explicitly sacral. Furthermore, the titles *eXistenZ* and *transCendenZ* can be read against the background of a philosophical-theological tradition.



Figure 11 eXISTENZ, 01:24:53.



Figure 12 THE MATRIX RELOADED, 01:49:05.

Finally, the production company PilgrImage suggests that the virtual trip is in some way to be envisaged as a substitute for traditional religious journeys.

The topic of virtual games and the copious use of religious symbolism is not restricted to art-house cinema. Commercial productions, like the *MATRIX* trilogy and *AVATAR*, equally employ religious plots and exhibit references to various faith traditions. Usually, religious references emphasize key moments at the narrative level and open horizons for interpretation. The iconography of Neo's death in *THE MATRIX REVOLUTION*, for instance, is clearly orientated on Christ's death on the cross.⁴ Analogous to Jesus' passion, Neo's suffering saves the whole world by freeing it from the *Matrix*, a destructive, totalitarian computer program (fig. 12).

AVATAR offers another example. Here, the devastating human impact on the planet Pandora—where the local inhabitants live in complete harmony with nature—seems to be inspired by the destruction of Yggdrasil as described in the old Germanic composition *Völuspá*⁵ (fig. 13). Thus, both films borrow elements from disparate traditions: Graeco-Roman religion, Buddhism and Chinese martial arts in the *MATRIX* series, or New Age and

4 Various approaches to the *MATRIX* series have outlined references to several different religious symbol systems (Christianity, Gnosticism, and Buddhism). For entry-points into the discussion see Lehnert 2001: *Buddhism in Film: Deciphering the Matrix*; Ford 2003: *Buddhism, Mythology, and THE MATRIX*; Fontana 2003: *Finding God in THE MATRIX*; Bowman 2003: *The Gnostic Illusion: Problematic Realised Eschatology in THE MATRIX RELOADED*; Stucky 2005: *He is the One: The Matrix Trilogy's Postmodern Movie Messiah*.

5 Cf. *Völuspá* 39 in: *Die Edda* 2004, 39.



Figure 13 AVATAR, 01:39:41.

Eco-Spirituality in *AVATAR*⁶. In both these films, the game element is present at different levels. The *Matrix* is the program that controls the world and humanity; it is the game of an evil power. In *AVATAR*, there are no traces of a game in the narrative, but the link to computer games is suggested by the visual and technological level of the production. Even the main characters are not fully played by human actors, but are rather computer generated 3-D-figures based on the hidden actors' bodies and motions.

Any analysis of religious semantics in film cannot overlook the programmatic role of a film's title. "Nirvana" and "Avatar,"⁷ and to a certain extent also "Existenz," are terms derived from religious contexts that have been integrated into game slang. The history of these concepts belongs at the same time to both the religious and the ludic spheres, and explains the functional significance of religious semantics in these types of film. On the one hand, they are integrated into the narrative and style as constitutive elements of the filmic diegesis, on the other hand, they operate as references

6 Cf. Detweiler 2010: *James Cameron's Cathedral: Avatar Revives the Religious Spectacle*; Linnitt 2010: *The Sacred in James Cameron's Avatar; Avatar and Nature Spirituality*, in: *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, 4, 4, 2010. Also the film review by Lertzman (2010: *Desire, Longing and the Return to the Garden: Reflection on Avatar*) is interesting, especially p. 42, where a link is established with the lost paradise of Eden in *Genesis*.

7 In Sanskrit, the term *avatāra* that comes from *avatāraṇa*, literally means "descent," and refers to the earthly manifestation of a deity, cf. Kinsley 1987: *Avatāra*.

to religious discourses. The significance of the latter aspect varies with the differing religious competences and practices of the audience. Religious semantics, therefore, are deployed as a pool of cross-references that may accentuate aspects of the narrative linking them with a "sacred" world.

To conclude this first part, focusing on religious semantics, it is important to assess the type of religious references within the selected films. The productions under consideration deal with general, well known religious commonplaces and concepts derived not from emic perspectives or scholarly categories, but rather from discourses about religion in the global village, mediated by the mass media.⁸

3. Playing With Virtual Worlds Within the Filmic Fiction

Detecting religious semantics, elements, motifs, quotations, and references on a narrative or audiovisual level offers an initial way of analyzing the cinematic interactions between play and religion. In this second step, we will consider cinema from an enhanced perspective, focussing on each film's possible generic classification and on the transformation processes that a film, as a consistent narrative, deploys. At this level, there are more specific and meaningful references to religious traditions.

As stated at the very beginning, all the selected films fall under the category of science fiction. I do not enter into the discussion of whether science fiction is a valid genre or not.⁹ For the purpose of this study, two points about science fiction are of particular relevance: firstly, *Revelation* has had a notable influence on many science fiction films and, secondly,

8 Cf. White 1997: *Religion and Media in the Construction of Cultures*; Hoover 1997: *Media and the Construction of the Religious Public Sphere*; Pezzoli-Olgiati 2010: *Eine illustrierte Annäherung an das Verhältnis von Medien und Religion*.

9 Spiegel 2009: *Die Regeln des Wunderbaren. Wesen und Form des Science-Fiction-Films*, 106: "Es erscheint mir deshalb sinnvoll, SF nicht als Genre, sondern als grundlegendere Einheit zu verstehen, die hierarchisch gewissenmassen tiefer angesiedelt ist als das Genre [...]. In Anlehnung an David Bordwells narrative Modi [Narration in the Fiction Film, London 1997 (1985)] schlage ich vor, diese neue Film-/Textsorte als 'fiktional-ästhetischen Modus' zu bezeichnen." For an overview of definitions of science fiction see Roberts 2006 (2nd ed.): *Science Fiction 1–36 and the study of Seeßlen/Jung 2003: Science Fiction. Grundlagen des populären Films*. Cf. also the very important contribution on the relationship between feature film and play/game by Leschke/Venus 2007: *Spielformen im Spielfilm*.

technology is often given a particular function within this area of cinematic production.

Considering the chosen film corpus, the first point, concerning the influence of the book of *Revelation*, is important in order to understand both the *MATRIX* trilogy and *AVATAR*. Both put on stage worlds—Earth in *MATRIX*, Pandora in *AVATAR*—that are threatened with total destruction at the beginning of the film. At the very last moment, a savior—Neo in *MATRIX*, Jake Sully in *AVATAR*—finds a way of preventing the final catastrophe. As film history illustrates, this science fiction line of narration—leading from a precarious, unstable world to a better world as a result of a sacrifice—often unfolds according to a plot similar to *Revelation*.¹⁰ In the case of *AVATAR*, it is relevant to remind readers that James Cameron quite frequently employs this kind of plot.¹¹ The overlapping of this story of transformation from cosmic instability to a final balance with a prominent religious narrative confers a transcendent, divine quality of salvation, onto the positive resolution of the plot, at least in the eyes of an audience aware of Jewish and/or Christian eschatological narratives.¹²

Let us now focus on the role of technology. In science fiction productions, new technologies are at the core of the narrative. However, in antithesis to fantasy, the technical achievements are presented in a pseudo-scientific manner; they are integrated into the filmic view of the world as normal, mundane aspects of everyday life.¹³ In the selected corpus, cyberspace represents this kind of integrated technological innovation.

10 Cf. Doyle 2006: *Christian Apocalyptic Fiction, Science Fiction and Technology*; Wright 2009a: "Every Eye Shall See Him": *Revelation and Film*; Pezzoli-Olgiati 2009a: *Vom Ende der Welt zur hoffnungsvollen Vision. Apokalypse im Film*, and 2009b: *Von der Science Fiction zu antiken religiösen Symbolsystemen, Welten und Gegenwelten im Vergleich*.

11 Cf. for instance the *TERMINATOR* series.

12 On a possible relationship between *EXISTENZ* and *Revelation* cf. Van Henten 2008: *Perversions of Food: Revelation and EXISTENZ*.

13 Cf. Spiegel 2009, 109: "Somit gelangen wir zu folgender Definition: Der Modus der SF wird durch ein wunderbares Element, das Novum bestimmt. SF unterscheidet sich von anderen wunderbaren Erscheinungen wie Fantasy oder Märchen dadurch, dass sie ihre Wunder pseudowissenschaftlich legitimiert, dass sie ihre Nova naturalisiert, so dass diese den Anschein wissenschaftlich-technischer Machbarkeit aufweisen. SF ist folglich jener Teil des Wunderbaren, der sich in seiner Bild- und Wortsprache an aktuellen Vorstellungen von Wissenschaft und Technik orientiert, um die bestehenden technologischen Verhältnisse in einen weiter fortgeschrittenen Zustand zu projizieren. Das 'technizistisch

Within the diegesis, cyberspace is an obvious part of the world's conception. On the level of the film's reception, the possibilities of virtual worlds are sufficiently widespread in society to enable viewers to understand the fiction, as Adam Roberts writes: "By the end of the century the premise of 'cyberspace' as a viable alternate simulacrum to actual reality was common enough currency to support a blockbuster movie, *The Matrix*."¹⁴

The new cyber technology represented in the film amplifies the possibilities of constructing and opposing different worlds within a consistent image of the universe. There is on the one side the world of the players—the filmic "real world"—and on the other side the embedded dimension of the virtual game, where the characters are only playable figures.

Focusing on the opposition between different realities as a central theme, films about games and virtual space can be aligned with certain sources deriving from the history of religions. Myths of creation, for instance, often describe an unstable world that will eventually be transformed into a balanced world, corresponding to the dimension in which the addressees of the narrative reside.¹⁵ On this basis, it seems reasonable to draw a correspondence between traditional mythologies and the filmic narrative that leads from the instability of cyberspace to the security of the saved world.¹⁶ Such a structure is evidently dominant in blockbuster movies.

Art-house films, however, tend to presuppose this narrative structure, and seek then to alienate it explicitly, particularly by blurring the boundary between the real world and the virtual space within the filmic fiction. In the case of *EXISTENZ*, the transformation from the filmic real world to cyberspace only occurs consistently in the first part; the further the narration develops, the more the demarcation between the different levels of the game and of the filmic reality dissolves. By the end, it is no longer apparent whether the film presents an opposition between game virtuality and reality, or whether there are only different qualities and moments of various moves within the game. Absence of coherence in space, time and action can bring the spectator to lose orientation. In the filmic diegesis,

Wunderbare' der SF hat zum Ziel, eine Aura der Wissenschaftlichkeit und technische Plausibilität zu erzeugen."

14 Roberts 2006 (2nd ed.), 125.

15 Cf. Stolz 2001 (3rd ed.): *Grundzüge der Religionswissenschaft*, 101–145 and 2004: *Paradiese und Gegenwelten*.

16 Cf. Pezzoli-Olgiati 2009a.

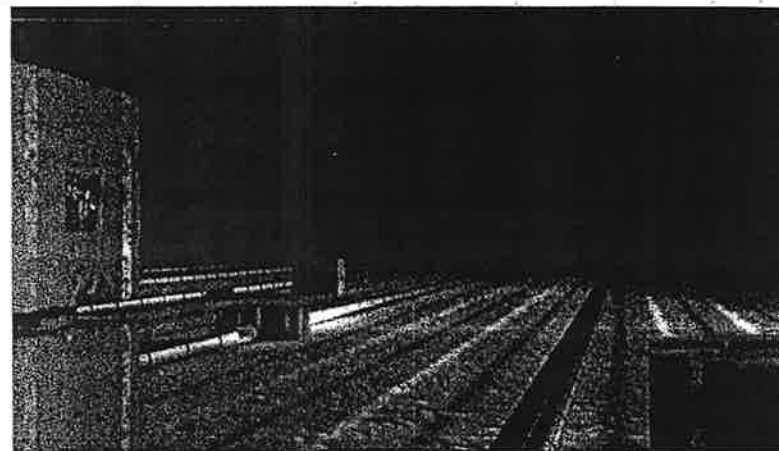


Figure 14 NIRVANA, 01:22:01.

virtuality and reality amalgamate. Life and game are no longer distinguishable, as a result of the trip from *eXistenZ* to *transCendenZ*.¹⁷

NIRVANA also alienates the boundary between cyberspace and real life, but by different means. Within the narrative, the attributes of two opposites—the filmic virtual world and the filmic real world—are inverted. The virtual space becomes a place where the game's figures reflect on the sense of their useless existence, while the humans are acting as programmed computer hardware.¹⁸ The following quotation illustrates this point. Solo is fully aware of being just a part of a program. He is speaking with the prostitute Maria, a girlfriend of a Mafia boss:

Maria: Sometimes I think that I should change game.
Solo: Sorry, what are you saying?
Maria: That I had to change my life.
Solo: Yes, but before you used another word. You used the word "game."
Maria: ... hmmm, so, a figure of speech. I could have said change film.
Solo: You could have, but you said change game. Why did you say that word?
Maria: I don't know.
Solo: Listen to me, Maria. You and I, we don't exist. Nothing around us exists. Uncle Nicola, the pizzas, the wine, the house are an illusion. We're both characters in a game. (00:30:30–00:31:20)

17 Cf. Mäder 2009: *Film und Religion am Beispiel von eXISTENZ. Ein religionswissenschaftlicher Ansatz*, 258–269; Weber 2008, 273–282.

18 Cf. Flor 2006: *Reisende soll man nicht aufhalten: die Filme von Gabriele Salvatores*, 74–84; Weber 2008, 261–272.



Figure 15 NIRVANA, 00:21:29.

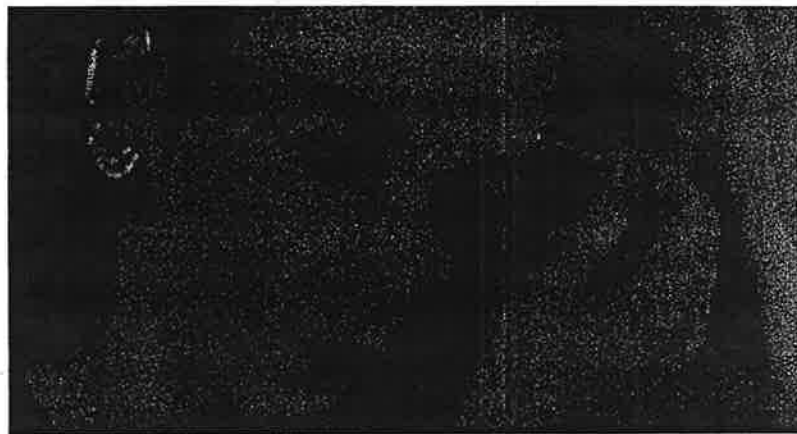


Figure 16 NIRVANA, 01:18:41.

Solo is aware of the limitations of the cyberspace universe; he knows that his virtual world is produced by electrical circuits (fig. 14). Hence, he begs his creator not just to kill him, since this is what is happening to him all the time within the game. Instead, Solo seeks to be radically deleted (fig. 15). In the real world, Naima, an expert in cybergames, has a human body with a plug where she can download the memories and the state of consciousness of other people. In fact, she is able to transform herself into a sort of biological hardware (fig. 16).

The different spaces, the real world of the designer and his friends on the one hand, and the virtual world of the game-figures on the other, are finally only distinguished by their respective filmic style, particularly by a specific use of color and light (figs. 17–18).

To sum up: as the second part of the analysis has shown, further interaction between game and religion can be pointed out following two tracks. The first one, the category of science fiction, presents a possible



Figure 17 NIRVANA, 01:18:40.



Figure 18 NIRVANA, 01:18:41.

historical link between religious narrative and filmic modes of narration. Following the other track, it is possible to work with the category of functional equivalence: religious myths and films about games put different, opposed worlds on stage. By choosing different forms of transformation processes, the opposite worlds can either stay clearly distinguishable, or the boundaries can become blurred. In any case, the comparison between different spaces and worlds introduces a level of reflection about human life in its appearance, its values, its dangers and chances, and its quality.

4. Cinema as a Place of Play

The selected films play—at the level of style, narrative and/or production technology—with the boundary between multiple realities: the real world and the game world, whereby both worlds always remain spaces mediated by the filmic fiction.

Hitherto, the analysis of the semantic elements and the consideration of science-fiction traits has outlined crucial aspects of the interaction between religion and game. In this measure, we can provisionally conclude that religious motifs and plots are used as well known, recognizable and powerful elements targeted at the films' respective audiences. They attribute to the style and the narrative a link to mythology and to various

religious traditions. Furthermore, religious references introduce a strong association between game and existential issues. Thus, the game is elevated to a meaningful part of life that can be paralleled by religion and has, to some extent, a function similar to that traditionally held by religion.¹⁹

The interaction between religion and game in film productions can be explained and deepened by means of different approaches to film and religion within the study of religion. Particularly useful are the contributions embedded in the broader field of cultural studies, since they allow us to focus not only on religion, film and game, but also on the interaction between them in a methodologically and theoretically precise way.²⁰ Film and cinema are thus considered as spaces where meaning is produced, represented, and mediated. Through its fictional status, film reproduces, debates, and reinvents images of the world. Hence, cinema could be defined as the place where filmic meaning-creating processes are distributed and received by audiences. It could also be seen as a social space of play, where cultural debates are mirrored, analyzed, and put into a different light through the specific form of filmic representation.²¹

In the particular setting of this study, dealing with film, religion and play, the social and cultural role of cinema as a place where meaning is produced is particularly important. In fact, the film, as a medium based on fiction, is itself a form of play that stages and produces meanings about play and game.

To better specify this self-reflexive aspect of film dealing with game and play, I will briefly introduce a possible differentiation between the two terms that is offered by the English language. Following *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, the verb and substantive “play” expresses an activity, the

19 On the interaction between religion and film as communication systems cf. Miles 1996: *Seeing and Believing. Religion and Values in the Movies*; Brinkmann-Schaeffer 2000: *Kino statt Kirche? Zur Erforschung der sinngebenden und religionsbildenden Kraft populärer zeitgenössischer Filme*; Plate 2003: *Representing Religion in World Cinema. Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making*; Lyden 2003: *Film as Religion: Myth, Morals, and Rituals*; Wright 2007: *Religion and Film: An Introduction*; Pezzoli-Olgiati 2008: *Film und Religion. Blick auf Kommunikationssysteme und ihre vielfältige Wechselwirkungen*.

20 Cf. Wright 2007 and 2009b: *Religion, Film and Cultural Studies*; Mäder 2009.

21 From the perspective of the study of religion, the link between cinema and theater could be deepened in the light of Turner 1982: *From the Ritual to the Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play*, and, as an example, Hastrup 1998: *Theatre as a Rite of Passage: Some Reflections on the Magic of Acting*.

performance of “recreation, amusement, esp. as the spontaneous activity of children and young animals” and/or “the playing of a game.” Play can happen in a space delimited by certain rules or it can be referred to as “a dramatic piece for the stage.”²² “Game” seems more orientated on the material premises of play, for instance “a form or spell of play or sport” or “the equipment for a game,” but also “a single portion of play forming a scoring unit in some contest.”²³ Evidently, these general definitions from a dictionary suggest that the two terms, even if they have distinct accents, do have an important overlapping semantic field. Salen and Zimmerman in *Rules of Play, Game Design Fundamentals* suggest two different approaches to the relationship between “game” and “play” which both explicitly address the overlapping constellation of the terms:

Games are a subset of play: Games constitute a formalized part of everything we might consider to be play [...]. Play is a subset of games: In addition to rules and culture, play is an essential component of games, a facet of the larger phenomenon of games, and a primary schema for understanding them. Neither one of these two relationships is more correct than the other. The first is a descriptive distinction that places the phenomenon of games within a larger set of real-world play activity. The second is a conceptual distinction that frames play as an important facet of games.²⁴

This approach to play and game, embedded in a manual for game designers, leads to the introduction of a further concept, “game play”: “This form of play is a narrow category of activity that only applies to what we defined already as ‘game.’ Game play is the formalized interaction that occurs when players follow the rules of a game and experience its system through play.”²⁵

I would place this definition within an emic insight drawing on specialist game production. Such insights are particularly pertinent in the context of the film corpus that we are considering here. *NIRVANA*, *EXISTENZ* and the *MATRIX* trilogy, deal, in fact, with the experience of playing a computer game by a full immersion in its set of rules and by experiencing it as a performance. In all these cases, the emphasis lies primarily on the “game play.” Thus, in *EXISTENZ*, we follow players acting within a virtual world, the game play. It appears to be extremely realistic and it influences our real perception, for instance stimulating in some scenes a strong sense of nausea by showing disgusting food. In the game play, the spectators lose

22 913.

23 484.

24 Salen/Zimmerman 2004: *Rules of Play, Game Design Fundamentals*, 303.

25 Salen/Zimmerman 2004, 303.

orientation between the numerous levels of the game that become more and more interconnected until the end, when even the subjective perception of the players in the film is totally confused. In the earlier quoted concluding sentence of the film "Are we still in a game?," the perceptions of the film characters and of the film spectators converge. The beginning and the end of the game play remain open.

In *NIRVANA*, there are many game plays going on in parallel worlds. On the computer screen, there are performances within the designed game *Nirvana*. The search for a possibility to delete the play is dramaturgically depicted on the cinema screen as a game play where Jimi and his friends have to find a way to infiltrate the company's server and to overcome their enemies, the evil game producers. Finally, the relationship between Jimi, his former lover Lisa and the cyber-specialist Naima is presented as a game play where the border between real and virtual perception are dissolved.

In the *MATRIX* trilogy, humanity as a whole is engrossed in a game play. The fact that only a few chosen people realize they are not living in real life, but only within the illusion of a computer program, does not change the fact that life has been transformed and controlled by the rules of a huge, cosmic game.

Following this line, *AVATAR* can be seen as a film where the difference between game play and real life is suggested only by the particular aesthetics and technology that reproduces the visual frame of a virtual game. The entire diegesis is identified with the game play of a game we do not know.

To summarize, we can state that the selected films challenge the audience by confusing reality within the filmic fiction with game play. Dealing with this theme, the corpus emphasizes cinema's function as a place where images of the world, existential questions, conflicts, and values are debated. The films prompt questions about the role, impact and meaning of virtual technologies and computer games in human life. Film, and cinema itself, becomes a game play: a space of playing in contrast to everyday life. Going to the cinema becomes the same as playing a game; it is like entering into the dimension of a play. The spectators are dominated by its rules and they experience a particular form of playing. From this point of view, the analyzed films on virtual games remain thematically close to *THE SEVENTH SEAL* that I referred to at the outset of this contribution, even though they deal with integrated new technologies and their challenges.

5. Conclusion

Using explicit references to religious symbolism, traditions and questions, the films under discussion triangulate the relationship of film, play/game and religion in a peculiar way. These specific systems of communication are therefore paralleled as dimensions that offer and challenge human orientation by means of fiction, narrative and visual inputs. It is not a symmetrical relationship but rather a multi-layered system of mutual references. Religion plays a role as a reference system providing a wide range of symbols, plots, and fundamental questions. The "religion" of the film does not correlate with any specific historical tradition: it is rather a constructed patchwork of topics and commonplaces reproduced by the media, that are still recognizable as expressions of a general, common idea of "religion."

From an etic point of view, the "religious" elements in the films provide a link to discourses that strive to negotiate the boundary between immanent and transcendent dimensions. Put in these terms, game and religion show similarities on a functional level, since they both enable experiences in virtual worlds that are constructed by means of narrative and visual imagery, and both are correlated with regulated practices.

I conclude with a hermeneutical remark. My considerations about the links between religion, play and film have been articulated from the perspective of the study of religion. For this purpose, I have laid an emphasis on spectacles that mediate access to the topic by considering film as sources and play/games as motifs in their interaction with religious symbolism and traditions. These academic glasses provide a structured view on a very complex phenomenon. Nevertheless, as we know, whatever spectacles we put on, there is an obligatory frame one cannot avoid, though one tends to forget its presence. Even on this level, the interaction between religious-historical analyses and simply watching a film has become intriguing and instructing. For instance, in order to be able to see the world of *AVATAR* in an astonishingly realistic way, the audience has to wear special, over-sized spectacles one forgets during the vision. Yet, as soon as one takes them off, the 3-D-illusion vanishes.

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Appendix

CULTUREL

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Recherches en sciences des religions

Im Auftrag der
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herausgegeben von

Philippe Bornet, Oliver Krüger,
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Games, Rituals, and Virtual Worlds

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Preface

Philippe Bornet and Maya Burger

The present book results from the symposium “Homo Ludens: Play, Culture and Religion,” which took place at the University of Lausanne (Switzerland) in June 2010.¹ The contributions published here were revised after the symposium, and enriched by newly-written essays. The title of the symposium was, of course, hinting at the seminal study by the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*. This work stimulated the study of play in an unparalleled way, being the first to look for a dimension of play in cultural productions as diverse as rituals, competitions, law courts, wars, wisdom, poetry, philosophy, and art. We have chosen to bring the various studies in this book together under the title of *Religions in Play* in order to underline that we are interested in both how religions interact with playful productions, and how religious productions can be considered as a variety of play.

The editors have been preoccupied with the topic of religion and play for quite some time in their teaching and research.² In different settings, ludic practices have proved to be an excellent comparative entry for the study of religions. The relations between religion and play/game indeed contain an heuristic potential to think about religion and play/game in a refreshed manner. In particular, the following issues appear especially challenging and promising:

A first observation is that an approach of religion through ludic practices allows one to take a step back from the traditional textualist paradigm, which prevailed for a long period of time in the study of religion. Studying

1 The symposium was made possible through the generous funding of the Swiss National Science Foundation, the Foundation of the 450th anniversary of the University of Lausanne, the Faculty of Lettres of the University of Lausanne as well as the Département Interfacultaire d’Histoire et de Sciences des Religions (DIHSR), in collaboration with the Swiss Museum of Games in La Tour-de-Peilz (Switzerland). The Swiss Society for the Study of Religion (SGR-SSSR) provided funding for the publication of the volume. We also thank warmly Nadia Cattoni, a PhD student and teaching assistant, who read carefully the entire manuscript, and Samuel Arnet (Pano publishing house, Zürich) for his precise proof-reading as well as his expert work on the typesetting of the book.

2 Before the symposium, two advanced graduate seminars on the topic were conducted at the University of Lausanne.